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What Really Happened in Bangladesh

Washington, Islamabad, and the Genocide in East Pakistan

Harold H. Saunders

The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide

BY GARY J. BASS. Knopf, 2013, 528 pp. \$30.00.

On November 13, 1970, a devastating cyclone struck East Pakistan, a province dominated by the Bengali ethnic group and physically separated from the rest of Pakistan by India. The cyclone killed an estimated 230,000 people, and in its wake, the national government, based in West Pakistan, did too little to alleviate the suffering, further alienating the long-underrepresented Bengalis. A year later, they would declare independence. As an officer in the U.S. consulate in the East Pakistani capital of Dhaka later noted, "The cyclone was the real reason for the final break."

Several weeks after the cyclone, on December 7, Pakistan held the first direct

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elections in its 23-year history. East Pakistan went for Mujibur Rahman, who headed a Bengali nationalist party called the Awami League, which was moderately pro-American. Sheik Mujib, as he was known, initially favored autonomy for both wings of Pakistan in a confederation. West Pakistan elected another nationalist, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He threatened to unseat the military government under General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan, who was commonly referred to as Yahya. Because East Pakistan was more populous than West Pakistan, the Awami League won a substantial majority of the seats in the new national parliament, and Mujib stood to become prime minister of the entire country.

Yahya had no interest in losing East Pakistan, and as negotiations among himself, Bhutto, and Mujib went nowhere, he postponed the opening of the National Assembly, which had been scheduled for March 3, 1971. Feeling that the fruits of their electoral victory had been stolen from them, the people of East Pakistan poured into the streets and then launched a general strike. Archer Blood, the U.S. consul general in Dhaka, reported to the State Department: "I've seen the beginning of the breakup of Pakistan."

Yahya banned the Awami League, ordered Mujib's arrest, and oversaw a brutal military crackdown that involved the systematic massacre of some 200,000 defenseless citizens and sent more than six million Bengalis fleeing across the Indian border. Later in the year, India reacted by invading East Pakistan, winning a 13-day war that made East Pakistan's earlier declaration of independence as Bangladesh a reality.

Throughout the crisis, as Gary Bass recounts in his new book, *The Blood*



The forgotten: refugees in East Pakistan, 1971

Telegram, the United States stuck by its ally, supporting Pakistan during the crackdown and threatening India as it prepared for war. The author has produced this gripping, thoroughly researched, concisely organized, and engagingly written account to spotlight what he calls the “significant complicity” of U.S. President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, in a “forgotten genocide.”

Bass relies not only on traditional sources, such as contemporary press accounts, interviews with participants, and the files of the State Department and the National Security Council staff, but also on the White House audio recordings that Nixon authorized. These tapes provide the rare opportunity to listen in on the private Oval Office exchanges between Nixon and Kissinger—a record that speaks irrefutably for

itself. One of the casualties of Bass’ book is the concept of the rational actor at the center of international relations: whether he intended to or not, Bass lays bare the conflicting interests, political realities, and deep personal animosities that rage at the heart of policymaking in a deep-rooted, multidimensional conflict.

STANDING BY

Once the election raised the prospect that Pakistan could split in two, U.S. policymakers faced sharply opposing options. The first was to try for a negotiated solution that would avoid bloodshed and preserve the unity of Pakistan, even while acknowledging the limits of U.S. influence in such an internal conflict. As a senior member of the National Security Council staff at the time, I am quoted as writing to Kissinger that the United States was

"witnessing the possible birth of a new nation of over 70 million people. . . . We could have something to do with how this comes about—peacefully or by bloody civil war." At the very least, I argued, Washington could urge Yahya not to unleash his military on the people of East Pakistan. In Bass' frequently repeated formulation, this option in effect placed "simply avoiding the loss of life" as a top policy priority.

The alternative course, which Nixon and Kissinger actually chose—inaction—reflected three impulses. First was their judgment that nothing the United States could say would restrain Pakistani leaders from doing everything possible to preserve the unity of their country. After all, the United States had once fought a costly civil war to preserve its own unity. Second was the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of other states. "We don't tell others how to run their countries," Kissinger often said. And third was the impulse to stand by a Cold War ally. The United States had given military assistance to Pakistan's leaders ever since the Eisenhower administration created the Middle East Treaty Organization and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization to counter Soviet influence, and Nixon and Kissinger wanted to stay the course.

But personal relationships also came into play. During his travels and meetings as vice president and president, as well as during his eight years out of office in between, Nixon had formed strong opinions of South Asia's politicians. Simply put, he liked Yahya, respected him as a leader, and saw him as an ally. Conversely, he disliked Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and distrusted India for its decision to remain formally

nonaligned yet relatively friendly to the Soviet Union. The taped conversations leave no doubt about Nixon's perceptions and feelings—often expressed in foul language.

As Bass' account unfolds, it becomes apparent that Nixon's liking for Yahya was something that Kissinger had to take into account when formulating his advice. Bass notes that my colleague Samuel Hoskinson and I sent a steady stream of memos to Kissinger throughout the crisis recommending that the United States pressure Yahya yet received no response. Presumably, Kissinger ignored us in part because he had to deal with the strong prejudices that Nixon revealed in confidence. Having worked with five presidents, I recognize that for better or worse, a critical factor in high-level policymaking is the president as a human being. Crudely put, there's no right or wrong way; there's the president's way.

Kissinger's decision also seems to have been motivated by his pessimism about the chances for a negotiated settlement: given how far apart the positions of Yahya's government and the nationalists were, Kissinger apparently did not think it would be possible for the two sides to reach a compromise. Although I repeatedly argued for an aggressive U.S. role in promoting a peaceful resolution to the crisis and share Bass' admirable commitment to saving lives, I must acknowledge with pain that even the United States cannot always prevent tragedy beyond its borders.

Further complicating the picture was the emerging thaw with China. Yahya had become an effective go-between in laying the groundwork for the normalization of

relations between the United States and China, which had drifted away from the Soviet Union during the 1960s. As Kissinger once explained to me, he felt that Beijing would carefully watch how faithfully Washington backed its ally. In the larger scheme of world politics and peace, the opening to China, along with the accompanying reordering of the balance of power, would count as a historic development and a major U.S. accomplishment.

THE BLOODBATH BEGINS

On March 25, when talks between the Pakistani government and the electoral victors broke down, the Pakistani army, wielding weapons supplied by the United States, launched a determined assault on the Bengalis in East Pakistan—often, as later became apparent, singling out the minority Hindu population. As the death toll mounted, Blood and his team in the American consulate in Dhaka intensified their reporting, even titling one cable “Selective Genocide.” Ultimately, 20 members of the staff signed a telegram, sent on April 6, registering their “strong dissent” from the administration’s policy. The message angered some top administration officials but won wide support among professional civil servants.

Blood and his colleagues, Bass writes, “refused to accept that Yahya could do whatever he wanted within Pakistan’s sovereign borders, overturning a fair election and killing his citizenry.” They wrote that Yahya’s “extra-constitutional martial law regime” was “of dubious legitimacy,” and they compared the Bengali struggle to the American Revolution. The same principles seemed to weigh on the mind of George H. W.

Bush, then the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. In internal discussions, Bush supported India’s right to condemn Pakistan at the UN, citing the “tradition which we have supported that [the] human rights question transcend[s] domestic jurisdiction and should be freely debated.”

Kissinger acknowledged that Yahya’s use of force to hold Pakistan together would probably fail, but he argued in interagency meetings that Washington was powerless to convince Pakistani leaders to act otherwise and noted Nixon’s strong personal relationship with Yahya. Not unexpectedly, when Kissinger presented the results of deliberations within the administration to the president, he found Nixon receptive to the policy recommendation that had reluctantly emerged—what one State Department official termed “massive inaction.” At this point in his account, Bass underscores his thesis: “There was one consideration that, while voiced by other U.S. officials, never made it into Kissinger’s note to the president: simply avoiding the loss of life.”

But Nixon and Kissinger prevailed, allowing no daylight between Washington and Islamabad. On April 21, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai sent a message through Yahya suggesting that a high-ranking U.S. official visit China—validating, in the minds of Nixon and Kissinger, their approach to Pakistan.

INDIA INVADES

By the end of April, an estimated one million refugees from East Pakistan had flooded across the border into India. Gandhi faced conflicting demands. On the one hand, given India’s experience with colonialism, she remained firmly

committed to the principles of national sovereignty and noninterference. Moreover, as Bass writes, it would be "embarrassing for India to cheer on secession in East Pakistan while stifling it in Kashmir." On the other hand, India had an underlying desire to inflict devastating damage on its foe Pakistan. Early in the crisis, Gandhi's military leaders told her that Indian forces needed months to prepare for an invasion of East Pakistan and that success depended on their waiting past the monsoon season for dry ground. She ordered them to get ready.

But it was the growing influx of refugees, ultimately numbering more than six million, that pushed India over the edge; the fleeing Bengalis were becoming an unbearable burden in a country already unable to care for its own poor. And so the Indian government, while waiting for the optimal conditions, trained and armed Bengali insurgents to bleed the Pakistani forces in East Pakistan. According to Bass, "the refugee crisis was driving India toward war."

This being the Cold War, the crisis reverberated far beyond South Asia, reaching not only policymakers in Washington but also their counterparts in Beijing and Moscow. China, having been a victim of Western and Japanese imperialism and confronting its own secessionist movements in Tibet and Taiwan, took Pakistan's side. Reacting to India's outcry over Pakistani atrocities, Zhou, Bass writes, "vowed to support Pakistan against 'Indian expansionists.'" At the same time, Beijing was not above backing pro-Chinese Bengali groups to improve its position in East Pakistan. The Soviet Union, meanwhile, signed a treaty of friendship with India.

In the United States, political opposition to U.S. support for Pakistan was mounting, further complicating the White House's policy. The movement's torchbearer was Senator Edward Kennedy, a Democrat from Massachusetts and a potential presidential candidate, who landed in India on August 10 for a fact-finding tour. He had intended to meet with Yahya in Islamabad, but the Pakistani government canceled his visa. In India, however, Kennedy toured refugee sites and met secretly with the Bangladeshi government in exile. His staff concluded that India could no longer bear the burden of maintaining the refugees and would have no alternative but to attack. When he returned to Washington, Kennedy assailed the administration, saying that he had just witnessed "the most appalling tide of human misery in modern times" and noting that the atrocities were being committed with U.S.-supplied arms.

As the refugee crisis worsened and the monsoon season came to a close, Indian troops started getting into more skirmishes near the border. Gandhi ordered the Indian military to invade East Pakistan on December 4. But on the evening of December 3, the Pakistanis launched a preemptive strike of their own, bombing Indian airfields near the border with West Pakistan and shelling Indian positions all along the western front, marking the beginning of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. The Indian army then launched its long-planned drive across East Pakistan, bypassing cities along the way in an effort to capture Dhaka and end the war quickly. India recognized Bangladesh on December 6. Ten days later, Pakistani forces in Bangladesh surrendered. The western

portion of the conflict ended, as Bass puts it, "in a bloody but inconclusive stalemate."

The outbreak of war had triggered a flurry of activity in the White House. Convinced that India was bent on destroying Pakistan, Kissinger persuaded Nixon to approve actions to protect the United States' ally. Washington asked the Chinese to mass troops on the Indian border and warned the Soviets not to intervene on India's behalf. It urged Iran and Jordan to transfer U.S.-supplied combat aircraft to Pakistan, despite clear advice that such action violated U.S. law. And it sent its most formidable aircraft carrier, the USS *Enterprise*, into the Bay of Bengal to cause India to think twice about invading Pakistan—a move the Indians would resent long afterward. Fortunately, the war ended before any of these actions could draw the other two major powers into the conflict.

DECISION TIME

When I went to work on the National Security Council staff in the Kennedy administration in 1961, a senior colleague said to me, "Remember: policy is rarely made on paper; it's a continuously changing mix of people and ideas." Too often, political scientists make the mistake of treating policymaking and decision-making as synonymous. Policy is a frame of mind, a strategy, or a sense of direction, whereas specific decisions define practical steps for moving in the desired direction.

In other words, policymaking is itself the process of determining which moral principles or strategic objectives to prioritize. Officials' choices often reflect deep struggles among conflicting interests and values, with the final judgments made

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not after mathematically weighing the pros and cons but by relying on gut feelings. Likewise, public arguments over policies often reflect the instinctive worldviews of the antagonists rather than honest dialogue to find the best possible approach.

Bass' stated objective is to correct what he regards as a whitewashed historical record and reveal the complicity of Nixon and Kissinger in the tragedy in East Pakistan. On that score, he has made his point, with the help of the Nixon tapes and his own impressive ability to organize and narrate a story that has a number of tracks. Yet whether or not he intended to, Bass has also presented a picture of the agonizing complexity of policymaking. Many readers will finish this book concluding that real-world dilemmas often have no clear right or wrong answers. Bass' own touchstone for U.S. policymaking in the events he analyzes is the protection of lives. Nixon and Kissinger, acting on a mix of predispositions (or prejudices), on the principle of noninterference, on a sense of commitment to an ally, and on a desire to establish a channel to China, put the U.S. relationship with Pakistan above humanitarian concerns. As is so often the case in real-world policymaking, they had to choose between moral and pragmatic considerations.

Bass' numerous citations of my memos reveal two points on which my approach differed from the course Nixon and Kissinger took. First, although I, too, respected the principle of noninterference, I had long felt that the United States had a moral obligation to use its influence to contribute to economic well-being and to prevent violence where possible. Kissinger, on the other hand, had to work with a president who

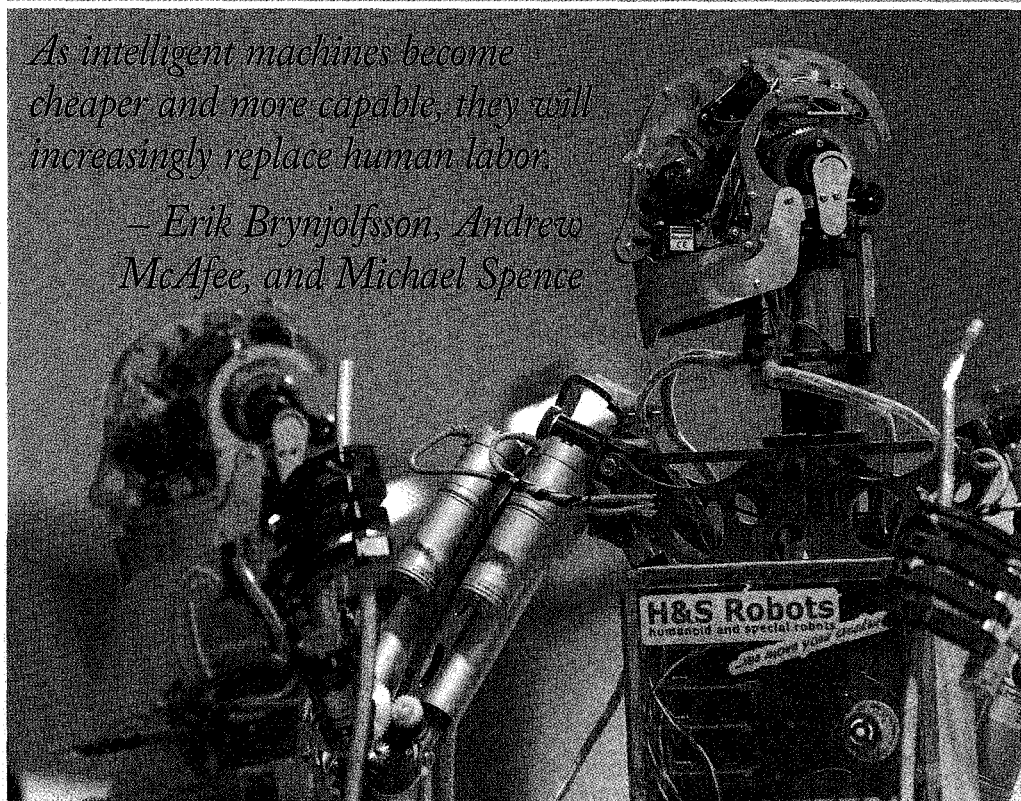
harbored a strong bias in favor of Yahya. Kissinger also felt that the United States had no real influence over Yahya, and he was determined to prevent India from attacking the government in West Pakistan. (Fortunately, India chose to settle for the separation of East Pakistan.) Second, experience had led me to be wary of policy rooted in emotion and anger. Of course, I could not have known about private conversations taking place in the Oval Office, but it is now clear just how vehement the emotions expressed there were.

In the end, Bangladesh emerged from horrible bloodshed as a viable nation, and India and Pakistan remain locked in an uneasy truce—with each now possessing nuclear weapons. We will never know whether the United States could have prevented the violence without doing more harm than good. Also up for debate is the broader question of whether Washington becomes an accomplice in another government's wrongdoing when it preserves a working relationship with that government for larger purposes—as it did with Stalin's regime during World War II and as it is doing with Beijing today. That is a matter of personal judgment. In the case of East Pakistan, I would have tried to promote a negotiated agreement, but such an effort might well have failed. Should Washington then have broken relations with Yahya? Its larger interests would have argued against doing so. Such are the complex questions with which policymakers at the highest level must grapple. But historians, commentators, and citizens who care about the conduct of U.S. foreign relations will make their own judgments about how such questions should ultimately be answered. 🌐

ESSAYS

As intelligent machines become cheaper and more capable, they will increasingly replace human labor.

— Erik Brynjolfsson, Andrew McAfee, and Michael Spence



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